

EVANGELISM**1 JOHN 4:14; 1 PETER 3:15; MATTHEW 9:12-13**

A tourist was driving through Kentucky when he went off on a side road to see some of the more rural parts of that beautiful state. He found himself in a very small town called No Hope, Kentucky. He thought to himself, "I wonder...." Sure enough, he drove around a little bit and found a little white structure in front of which was a big sign that declared it to be "The No Hope Baptist Church." Do you know any churches like that? A church that exists merely to help meet the needs of its members is a no hope church. A church that believes it's someone else's responsibility to witness to others about the transforming power of Jesus is a no hope church. The late Christian leader William Temple put it well: "The church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefits of its non-members." I want to talk to you about evangelism today.

"ROPEs: Discipleship Described" is the message series we're in. The word "ropes" is an acronym that stand for five words: relationships, obedience, prayer, evangelism, and Scripture. This is how we define or describe being a disciple – an intentional follower – of Jesus in this place – Karl Road Baptist Church. We've already talked about relationships, obedience, and prayer. Today I want you to think with about the E in ROPEs which stands for evangelism. At the end of today's service, we're going to take the opportunity to apply today's message immediately by praying for real people who don't know Jesus personally yet. Last week we asked you to put down the names of spiritually lost people you know on your Connect Cards. Many of you did that. Thank you! For a few minutes at the end of the service, those names are going to be up on the screen so we can pray for those people by name. But we want to add new names this morning. On every message screen slide today is a phone number you can text anytime during the message this morning. Just provide the first name of a person who needs Jesus. When we get to our prayer time, those names will be added and appear on the screen, too. Three truths to think about today. Here's the first one.

A DISCIPLE TAKES THE GOSPEL OF JESUS TO OTHERS.

That's a simple, straightforward truth, but it's often avoided by followers of Jesus. It's all over the Bible. For example, let's read this verse together out loud. "We have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world." (1 Jo 4:14 NLT) A better known passage is something called the Great Commission. Just a few days before He went back to Heaven, Jesus commanded His followers to "Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." (Mt 28:19 NLT) The first step in making disciples is helping people get evangelized, converted, born again, saved, become a believer – whatever word or words you want to use.

Now the word "evangelism" doesn't appear in those two passages we just read. The English word "evangelism" comes from a Greek work "euangelious" meaning a "good message." The first truth about evangelism is that it's simply sharing the good message of who Jesus is and what He's done with someone else. If that person is open and willing, you can then pray with him or her to receive Jesus as Savior. But Jesus always

went to the heart of any matter. He didn't invite anyone just to believe in Him, but instead he invited everyone to become His disciple. Secondly, then, evangelism is helping a person become a fully devoted disciple of Jesus. Not just a believer, but a disciple. A disciple is a person who gives up being his or her own boss and invites Jesus to become the Boss. A disciple surrenders control of his or her life to Jesus who is now Lord. A disciple becomes personally committed to and absolutely loyal to Jesus forever. A disciple knows that to follow Jesus means ongoing transformation of his or her attitudes, lifestyle, habits, activities – anything and everything. A disciple knows that following Jesus is more than just knowing what Jesus said or did. It means doing what He said. Let's never forget that the Gospel is always more than Jesus giving you your "get out of hell free" card or your "go straight to Heaven when you die" card. It means starting to live a totally new life under the direction of a new 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and 365 days a year Boss who loves you like no other!

You can't really separate evangelism from discipleship. They're vitally connected. They flow into one another. It's hard to talk about one without getting into the other. It's a little bit like someone brand new to Columbus asking you, "How do I get to this place called Easton where I've heard there are all kinds of stores and restaurants?" You say, "Well, first you get into your car and turn it on." Then, without another word, you turn around and walk away. True, you got the person started, but he needs a bit more help than that, am I right? Instead, you add, "Take a left out of the church parking lot – that's Karl Road. Drive that way for about a mile until you come to Morse Road. Turn left there and drive for another two or three miles. Before you get to I-270, you'll see Easton on your right." Evangelism and making disciples is simply giving people spiritual direction so they end up in the right place.

You can't be a real follower of Jesus – a disciple – and care less about evangelism. Being a disciple means obeying Jesus' commands, one of which is to share the good message about Him with others. Jesus said He came into this world to seek and save lost people. That's why He allowed Himself to be humiliated, tortured and killed on a cross. If you don't think evangelism is important, don't claim then to be a disciple of Jesus. You just don't know His heart, His passion, or what He cares about more than anything else. If you don't think evangelism is important, why do you even consider yourself a Christian at all? It's that basic, that fundamental, and that foundational. Here's a second truth to consider today.

A DISCIPLE RECEIVES INSTRUCTION ON THE TRUTHS OF THE GOSPEL AND HOW TO SHARE THEM EFFECTIVELY.

Here's a wonderful verse that supports that truth. Please say it with me. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." (1 Pt 3:15 NIV) Please notice that as a disciple of Jesus, you're called to provide, first of all, a ready answer. The verse says, "Always be prepared." Those believers to whom Peter wrote this letter were starting to experience persecution and harassment from unbelievers. Maybe young Johnny was getting beat up because his family belonged to this weird group who called

themselves Christians. Perhaps his father's business was being boycotted. Perhaps his mother felt a lot of tension in the air when she was around other women in the community. Nobody was being killed yet for being a disciple of Jesus, but, yes, that would happen later. How easy it would have been for those very first disciples of Jesus to become secret believers! But Peter made it plain this was unacceptable. He suggested that, instead, they show a patient readiness to share Jesus with anyone who showed a genuine interest. There's a lot of suspicion and some hostility today towards Christians in different sectors of our culture. The media. The academic community. The political world. The temptation for Christians is to withdraw, to mind our own business, and to make our pursuit of following Jesus private.

But Peter assumed that Jesus' disciples create interest and curiosity among lost people. Lost people should be thinking, "I wonder why he does that... I wonder why she believes that way.... I like how they treat me." At some point a question is asked or a comment is made. What does a disciple do? He's ready. She wants God to use her. They've been waiting and praying for God to create the opportunity. I'm not suggesting they launch into a sermon or a full-blown Gospel presentation. It might just be a brief word of explanation that sets the stage for another spiritual conversation, and then another spiritual conversation after that. A disciple is open, available, and on call to the Holy Spirit every day all day long. He might say to you, "Did you hear that, child of God? That's a question about spiritual stuff. There's a comment that indicates your friend is considering Jesus. Say this. Do that."

Who are you and I supposed to be ready for? "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you...." Everyone and anyone. Let God bring the people into your life to whom you can give an answer. Be ready to give an answer to whoever God sends into your life, not who you think might be a worthy candidate. I've discovered that hurting people are often open to considering Jesus. I wish it didn't take a life crisis – a divorce, a job loss, the death of a loved one – to get someone thinking about God, but often it does. People suddenly realize they're not smart enough, strong enough, or skilled enough to handle everything life dishes out. It's often then that the Holy Spirit can gently move them towards Jesus. Don't ignore a hurting person. God may use you in the midst of that person's life crisis to pull him or her towards Jesus' grace, love, and healing. Those opportunities don't last forever. Sometimes a person's heart opens very briefly and then the door closes. All the more reason to be ready.

Some years ago now there was a celebration at a New Orleans municipal pool. The party was held to celebrate the first summer in memory without a drowning at any New Orleans city pool. Everyone was so pleased! In honor of the occasion, two hundred people gathered, including one hundred certified lifeguards. As the party was breaking up and the four lifeguards on duty began to clear the pool, they found a fully dressed body in the deep end. They tried to revive Jerome Moody, aged 31, but it was too late. He had drowned surrounded by lifeguards celebrating their successful season. There are people around us drowning in loneliness, hurt, and doubt. We don't even realize it sometimes. Yes, we followers of Jesus have every reason to celebrate, but our mission is to rescue the perishing. Often they're right next to us.

That same verse encourages you and me to give, secondly, a reasonable answer. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” The Greek word “apologia” is translated “answer” in that verse. It doesn’t mean to apologize for being a follower of Jesus. It’s like providing a defense in a court of law as to what you have done and why you did it. Be prepared to explain to anyone who asks you what you believe about Jesus and why you believe it. It doesn’t have to be deeply theological. In fact, it’s probably better if it isn’t! But it should make sense. When Peter tells us to be ready to give a reason for our hope, he uses the Greek word “logos” from which we get our word “logical.” Be prepared to provide a reasonable, logical explanation of why you think Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

Do you know, this morning, why you’re a follower of Jesus? Do you know what you believe and why you believe it? There’s absolutely nothing more important to get sorted out and nobody can do it for you. Now, don’t make it harder than it is. It doesn’t demand an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible. Peter assumed that the average, ordinary disciple of Jesus could give a reasonable answer as to why he or she followed Jesus – not just pastors, Bible teachers, or theology professors. Those first Christians were, at the very best, amateur evangelists – ordinary people who went about the streets and market places where they lived chattering about Jesus. Nobody had formal training. Nobody was paid to do it. Men and women, Jews and non-Jews, young and old, educated and uneducated – all empowered by the Holy Spirit – became natural and effective witnesses to the life-changing power of Jesus.

Third, be prepared to give a respectful answer. The verse says, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” How you say something about Jesus is as important as what you say. Maybe you’ve known a zealous, “on fire” disciple of Jesus, but being around him was like being around a piece of sandpaper. You admired her commitment to Jesus, but she had a way of taking your skin off when you were around her! Show respect for and courtesy toward lost people especially to those who are curious enough to ask questions about why you follow Jesus. When you do that you acknowledge that even a lost person is made in God’s image and thus worthy of your honor and respect. Also, when you treat a lost person with gentleness and respect, you acknowledge that he or she is a victim rather than an enemy. The Bible tells us that Satan has blinded the minds of lost people so they can’t understand the good news about Jesus. They’ve been spiritually brainwashed by the devil and the culture around them to believe lies about God. Lost people are not our enemies. Satan is the enemy. Lost people – and some of them are obnoxious, to be sure - are victims that need our love and compassion, not our hostility and judgment.

That simple truth should profoundly affect how we do church in this place. Of course, we don’t condone or excuse any sin, but do we go out of our way to love sinners? Really? Let’s face it. Often we Christians spend more time and energy figuring out ways to get away from ungodly people than we spend trying to develop relationships

with them intentionally. That's the quickest route to being a no hope church. Is this church a museum for perfect people or a hospital for spiritually sick people? We have to be open to everyone with any kind of problem. We have to believe that no one is beyond God's love and power to change. Every person has value and significance to God; after all, Jesus died for that person. So, open your hearts and your arms to those who are broken, who are lonely, who are hurting, who've been rejected, who have failed themselves and others, and who wonder if they themselves have any value to anyone else. Listen to them. Love them. Invite them to share life with you. A final truth today.

A DISCIPLE IS ENMESHED IN THE LIVES OF UNBELIEVERS.

Jesus was enmeshed in the lives of unbelievers. One of Jesus' disciples, Matthew, was a tax collector. Tax collectors were considered thieves by those being taxed. They took extra money over and above what the Romans demanded in taxes to pad their own pockets. Tax collectors were also considered traitors by their fellow Jews, because they aided and abetted the hated, despised Romans who ruled the country. Soon after Matthew started to follow Jesus, he invited Him and the other disciples to a big party at Matthew's home. Mathew invited his other tax collector friends to the party. The religious people – the Pharisees – had a conniption! Good people don't sit down and eat a meal with bad people! Godly people don't hang out with people who willingly break God's laws! But this is what Jesus said and I ask you to read it out loud with me. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mt 9:12-13 NIV) I love how the Message translation renders those verses, too. "Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? Go figure out what this Scripture means: "I'm after mercy, not religion." I'm here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders."

What does evangelism look like for you and me on an everyday level? Here are four simple steps any disciple of Jesus can take. First, pray specifically for lost people. Start by asking God to give you a heart for the lost people who already live in your circles of influence. You know, the people in your own family, in your neighborhood, where you work, where you go to school, or where you work out who don't follow Jesus. I've learned I don't have God's heart for much of anything unless I ask Him. I'm selfish and self-centered by nature. But then start praying for specific people. Pray for them by name. Pray that God will prepare their hearts. Ask God to send a person to point them to Jesus and offer yourself as one person who is willing to point them to Jesus.

Second, build authentic friendships with lost people. Now, you might say, "Rick, isn't it wrong to make a friend of someone just so you can talk to him or her about Jesus someday?" Yes, if you put it like that, I suppose so. It's wrong to have the attitude, "Well, I'll give Bernie over there three weeks. If he doesn't fall down on his knees and pray to receive Christ by then, I'll move on to someone else." Nobody wants to be your project. But many lost people are open to authentic friendships. That simply means you sincerely make a friend of a lost person regardless of whether he or she ever becomes a follower of Jesus. That person is valuable to God and loved by God even if he or she never trusts in Jesus. The fact is that unless you become his or her authentic

friend – or some other disciple of Jesus does so – the opportunity to hear about the good news of Jesus and respond will probably never happen.

Third, take advantage of any divine opportunities. I'm convinced God gives us far more of these than we recognize. I've missed so many of these myself I'm ashamed to admit it. Sometimes it's just taking an interest in people. The Holy Spirit is the One who suggests you and I take the initiative and make the first move. Perhaps someone will start telling you about a difficulty in his or her life. Why not offer to pray for him or her? Sometimes you and I can wave "a faith flag." What's that? It's just a comment or something you do that lets a lost person know that you're a disciple of Jesus. There's nothing more wonderful than actually praying with someone as he or she receives Jesus as Savior, but, frankly, that doesn't happen very often. More often than not, a divine opportunity is a gentle nudge by the Holy Spirit to begin a friendship, to engage in an act of caring, to show appropriate interest in a person's life, and to wave a faith flag.

Finally, trust God to empower you. Notice how right after Jesus tells us to go out and make disciples of everyone everywhere, He promises to be with us always. "Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations.... And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Mt 28:19-20 NLT) That was no idle remark by Jesus. That's a wonderful promise to be with us anytime we reach out to others in His Name. You aren't called to share your faith with anyone in your own strength or in your own ability. But you are called to do it. I like how one person put when it comes to evangelism. "Without God we can't; without us He won't." In and of ourselves, you and I are totally ineffective in influencing even one person to consider Jesus. Without God we can't. But God Himself has already decided that His method of reaching lost human beings is through other human beings He's already made His children. That's you and me. Could God do it some other way? Sure, but He won't. Without us He won't.

Dianne Williams was a fifth grade teacher at the time. She went skydiving one day with some friends. Apparently, she was trying to join three other skydivers in a hand-holding formation. Unfortunately, she slammed into the backpack of another parachutist and was knocked unconscious. She started to tumble head over heels like a rag doll toward the ground at a speed of 140-160 mph. Fellow skydiver, Gregory Robertson, noticed that Dianne was in trouble, so he attempted something called a "no lift" dive: arms pinned to his sides, ankles crossed, head aimed at the ground. He was like a dive bomber – a vertical dart - plummeting towards Dianne and the ground at 200 mph. At 3500 feet – about 10 seconds before impact - Gregory caught up with Dianne. He managed to pull the rip cord on her emergency parachute as well as his own chute and they floated safely down to the ground. It was a remarkable rescue. Skydivers compare it to trying to get your hands around a football that's flopping down the road at you at 40 mph and somehow hold on to it. The Bible makes it clear that many people are hurtling helplessly toward destruction spiritually. God is eager to give you the opportunity – if you're truly interested – to pull some ripcords. "Without God we can't; without us He won't."